

STENCH OF DEATH

Second Edition

Stench of Death*Second Edition**

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1. <https://inasmanywords.com/>

Stench of Death

Chapter 1

Day 1

It was already dark when Tanya left her Redwood Estate flat. A chill wind bit her exposed thighs as her high-heeled boots clicked down the concrete steps.

She never used the lift. No one who knew Redwood used the lift unless they had business to do out of sight. Even then, they'd have to tolerate the eye-watering parfum-de-urine.

Tanya felt the faint buzz of her phone from her clutch bag. She knew who the message would be from.

'Where r u?' Carly had sent.

'On way now xxx.'

It didn't answer the question, but Carly had been sending texts for most of the afternoon. Tanya hoped it would be enough to shut her up for a while. She wanted to keep her hands in the pockets of her fake fur coat.

She walked up to the bus stop on Fairbrook Road, which was barely lit under a dull orange streetlight. Council budget had not stretched far enough to upgrade the lighting in an area where most people preferred not to see what was really going on.

Tanya tried to check the timetable, but a collection of graffiti and cigarette lighter burns meant even the light from her mobile was little help.

'Shit!'

She'd just missed a bus. At least a twenty-minute wait for the next, but only if it bothered to show up. She considered updating Carly and asking her to send apologies to the girls.

Tanya looked down the road, willing the previous bus to be a late runner only a minute or two away. Time meant money. Quite literally in her line of work.

The road seemed deserted. A thick wooded area behind her was just six foot back from the path. A chill ran down her spine, and it wasn't

caused by the cold. The stop was out in the open, and she felt more exposed than usual.

Tanya's phone buzzed again. She was good friends with Carly, but sometimes she felt that girl could be a bit too needy.

'Hi Tanya how are you?'

The number wasn't recognised. *'Whos this?'*

'James.'

There was only one James she could think of, and she'd not heard from him in weeks. *'Im good. New number?'*

'Lets meet up again. Your place.'

She was beginning to regret giving him her number. *'Working.'*

There was a longer pause, and Tanya took a moment to check the time.

Another message came through.

'Mrs is away this weekend.'

Tanya wanted to tell him where to go, but business meant money. *'Will text u.'*

She took a moment before hitting send. And then waited.

Another look at the timetable and check of the time.

She stared at her phone and saw the numbers shudder and blur as it slipped from her fingers.

The hot, stinging sensation started at the back of her head. Then it filled all around and behind her eyes.

The ground appeared to fly closer.

Everything went black before she even hit the ground.

* * *

Carly hadn't heard from Tanya for an hour. When she called, it went straight to voicemail.

Something felt wrong. They always met just across from Loretta's B&B on the edge of the town centre, in a prominent place in the red-light district.

Carly introduced Tanya to Loretta, who ran what was little more than a well-organised brothel. It's not actually illegal to charge someone for sex. And since all the girls were self-employed, and merely hired the rooms from Loretta, she wasn't breaking any law regarding prostitution.

Loretta provided a safe place for sex workers to do their trade, and they all had to be over eighteen. Any under-age girls trying to use her place were redirected to social services. Everyone had access to regular STI screenings and benefitted from professional security. Illegal drugs were banned, and Loretta even abided by the smoking laws.

She ran a tight ship. Calls for police support were rarely needed. And discretion for guests was almost as tight as the data protection act.

Everyone in the local area knew what Loretta's business was, and even those staunchly against the sex trade in any guise reluctantly admitted it was a lesser of the evil.

Carly and Tanya had become close. Both single, in their early twenties, kicking old drug habits. Skunk and various legal highs were proving to be as deadly as any dodgy gram of crack or heroin. They both lived on the Redwood Estate, and generally worked the same shifts at Loretta's.

But Carly was starting an evening's work without Tanya, and it felt wrong. She thought about trying her number again as she climbed the steps to the dark red door.

Carly pushed the buzzer for entry and the small two-way screen lit up. Moments later the door clicked unlocked. She pushed it open and walked straight through the hall. Steve was the on-duty security, and she shot him a quick smile.

He was dressed in all blacks with a high-vis ID badge on his upper left arm. Steve's face was always stuck in a grimace which made it clear he was not someone to argue with. The shape of his nose said some had tried, but the fact Steve was the one still alive showed they'd failed. Despite his ominous looks, his smile to Carly was warm and sincere.

Carly made her way into the front reception room to find Loretta open-armed and all hugs.

As always, Loretta kept her place clean and respectful. Besides a few choice magazines on the coffee table, there was little on show that suggested the type of business available in the establishment.

'Where's Tan?' Loretta asked, as she fiddled with Carly's hair, and lifted her chin with one finger.

'I text her an hour ago,' Carly shrugged. 'Said she was on the way.'

'Probably them damn buses again.' Loretta rolled her eyes.

But Carly wasn't convinced.

She let Loretta take her coat and hand it to another of the women to hang up.

Loretta held a position comfortably between matriarch and kind grandmother. Her hands and fingers revealed far more work had been done to maintain the carved features of her smile and brow.

'I don't like it, Loz,' Carly continued. 'Tan never does this.'

One of the other women stood, adjusting what little clothes she had on. 'You've known her, what, two days?'

'Wind ya neck in, bitch,' Carly snapped back.

'Ladies, ladies, come now,' Loretta played the peacekeeper. 'Tan will show up in a bit, apologies and all. Nowt to worry.' She lowered her voice for Carly. 'Go freshen yourself up.'

Carly laid a light kiss on Loretta's cheek and made her way to her regular room.

Tanya was still on her mind.

Chapter 2

Day 2

DS Greg Randle was already finishing his third black coffee of the day. It was only ten o'clock.

An arrest the previous night had turned a little rough and required some extra ass-covering to explain physical marks left on the suspect. Tempers had been frayed after a uniformed officer had been knocked out with one punch.

Randle had a few moments before his back-up arrived on scene and returned the favour. In self-defence, of course. Resisting arrest.

The detective had a reputation of being somewhat black-and-white when it came to meting out immediate justice. He wasn't a large man, or particularly well-built. But he was fast, and when the adrenaline was pumping, he could stand up for himself.

A phone rang from across the room, followed by an arm waving from DS Shaw's desk.

'This one's yours, Greg.' DS Martin Shaw waited for a response.

'I'm not here.'

'It's the DCI.'

'I'm washing my hair.'

Shaw smiled back as he returned the receiver to his ear. 'Terribly sorry, sir. DS Randle says he's washing his hair.'

Randle mouthed an expletive Shaw's way.

'Boss says he's on line P45.'

Randle's desk phone let out a metallic chirp. 'Sir,' Randle answered with only just enough of a respectful tone. 'Yes. Sorry.'

The call was short. The instructions were clear. He was to remove his thumb from his backside and send an update on a missing person's case. A local man had been reported missing by his wife, but with no sign of foul play or any physical evidence, there were simply no leads.

Being forced to chase a wandering old man was not Randle's idea of work.

'Mart, you're with me.'

DS Shaw looked up. 'I'm not rinsing you off again, mate.'

'Follow-up on the McGregor case.'

Randle's mobile rattled in his pocket, and he took it out, hoping that something more pressing had occurred. The name caught him off guard. 'Warm the car up, I'll be right behind,' he said to Shaw, without looking at him.

Shaw didn't hide his own frustration. He was an unusually tall man, and not in the slightest bit slender. His coat hung from the hooks on the wall right down to the floor, a good eight or so inches further than most others.

'Well, hello there,' Randle lowered his voice to the caller. He allowed Shaw to gain distance as they left the incident room.

'Are you free, Mister Detective Sergeant R-andle?' The woman on the other end of the line purred the R.

'When?'

'Soon as.'

'Soon as...this evening...?' He let the question hang.

The line went quiet for a moment until there was a change in tone. The playful flirting was over. 'I'm worried about someone, Greg.'

He watched Shaw start the car and made the snap the decision to pay the woman a visit straight away. He gestured at Shaw to lower the window.

'I'll meet you there. Just start off with the usual bull, okay?' Randle said as he made his way to his own car.

Shaw rolled his eyes. There wasn't any point arguing. He was tempted to follow Randle, more out of intrigue than suspicion. But he trusted his colleague enough not to cross a certain line.

Shaw arrived at the McGregor address less than twenty minutes later and decided to wait a short while before going in. He had the whole case in his head and had been to the house to see the old woman a few times.

The woman was sharp enough, but she also seemed to float onto her own little planet, distracted by another thought. Shaw had seen it plenty of times before with the elderly, especially when they lost a loved one and their whole world changed.

At least Mrs McGregor was one of the friendlier ones.

A knock on his door window jolted Shaw out of his daydream.

'Hello there, love,' she said, tapping at the window like a fish tank. A grin lit up her face all the way to her eyes.

'I thought it was you,' she continued, as Shaw wound down the window. 'Saw you pull up. Wondered if you were coming to see me.'

'Good morning, Mrs McGregor.'

'Tea?'

'Sorry?'

'Or coffee? Is it you or your lovely man friend who likes the coffee? I have some coffee brewing...'

'We've just come round to check in with you about the case,' he said, opening the door and having to gently usher her to step back so he could get out.

'Bollocks!' Her expression turned serious.

Shaw fumbled over a reply. 'It's really just an update, nothing to...'

'Milk. I think I'm out of milk,' she cut him off. Her smile flashed back into place and her eyes lightened again.

Shaw took the cue to close the car door and say a silent prayer for Randle to hurry up.

'Do you mind black? I don't suppose you do.' Mrs McGregor was a fairly short woman, which meant Shaw towered over her. She turned and waddled, penguin-like, back towards her house. Several layers of jumpers and cardigans hid her neck completely.

She'd left the front door open for Shaw and kept nattering away, even though he'd not been listening to a word she was saying.

'You pop yourself down in the living room. Sugar?'

It took Shaw a moment to register she was asking him a question. 'One, thanks.'

'White or fancy brown? I know some people like fancy brown sugar in black coffee.'

'Since you're making it, why not go special?' Shaw knew well that allowing a person to make a kind gesture could go a long way to building and maintaining trust.

'I've only got white.'

Shaw didn't bother responding.

There was no new information about her husband, so he was at a loss as to why he was there. Which was mainly why he wished Randle would hurry up.

'There we go, love. Grandma McGregor's finest brew,' the old woman said as she handed him coffee like it was a sacred liquor.

* * *

Randle gave the girl from Loretta's reception an appreciative nod as the mug of tea was placed in front of him. She let her forefinger sensually roll around the top edge of the mug.

'It's been a while,' Loretta said with a smile.

'What's this about?'

There was a reluctance in Loretta's pause. 'One of my girls. I'm worried.'

'Worried?'

'She didn't show last night.'

'Which girl?' Randle asked, with a slight grimace. His occasional use of their services was always heavily discounted in return for handling the occasional issue off the record. It was arrangement they both treated with the utmost discretion.

‘Tanya. She’s only been here a couple of months or so. You won’t have...’

‘Makes it a little less awkward, then,’ the detective took a deep drink of his tea.

‘One of the other girls last heard from her by text, saying she was on her way. She was a no-show the whole night.’

‘And that’s unlike her?’

‘My girls can’t afford not to show up, Greg. And she’s a good girl. She’s not like that.’

‘She clean?’

Loretta gave him a look that reminded him he should know better than to ask.

‘Popular? Any weirdos?’

‘None anyone knows of.’

‘Where does she live?’

‘Now, now, detective.’

‘Come on Loz. This is me. Besides, there’s nothing I can do if I don’t know that.’

Loretta ran her fingers through the hair on the sides of his head. Tenderly, softly, she leaned forward and let a warm breath run up his cheek until she got to his ear. ‘Redwood’.

‘You know, you could have asked me this on the phone.’ Randle winked at the woman. She was getting towards her latter years, but there was still something he found utterly sensual about her.

And she knew it.

‘And pass up an opportunity to see my favourite policeman in the whole city?’ Taking a small note pad and a pen, she quickly scrawled down Tanya’s address.

Randle finished his drink. Loretta teased him with the piece of paper, touching the tip of his nose, across his lips and chin, tracing it down his body, and slipping it into his trouser pocket. Her hand strayed a little too deep for a little too long.

'Are you sure you can't stay for...'

'Let me look into this.' He gave her a mischievous wink. 'First.'

Loretta took a moment to tighten and tidy Randle's badly knotted tie. He wasn't scruffy, but his waxed hair and casual attempt of tie-wearing meant plain-clothes work suited him.

Randle took his mobile out as he left Loretta's, sending Shaw a text. He'd look into Tanya's apparent disappearance later, when it would be less obvious that he was working off-the-record.

He stopped for a moment as a thought crossed his mind that an awful lot of his time was being taken up with missing person cases.

* * *

The door was answered by a somewhat excited Mrs McGregor. She ushered Randle inside like an old friend, or a son she hadn't seen for months.

'We've been having a lovely chat, me and that handsome friend of yours,' she said, almost pushing Randle into the living room. Mumbling away to herself, she returned to the kitchen to make more drinks.

'Where the hell have you been?' Shaw fizzed through gritted teeth.

Randle laughed. 'Anything new crop up?'

'When I've had chance to get a word in edgeways, no. Same old stuff. He went to the shop on the way to the allotment. Not been seen since.'

'Classic,' Randle rolled his eyes.

'They've lived here for decades.'

Mrs McGregor chose that moment to waddle into the room with a tray.

'Now, gentleman, we have drinks and biccies for a nice little chit-chat.' She handed another coffee to Shaw.

A plate of impeccably presented biscuits was thrust under their nose with a mildly maniacal smile and a pointing of her eyes. Taking at least one seemed like a duty of manners more than an invite of hospitality.

Mrs McGregor put the plate down and poised herself on the edge of her own armchair. She moved an ashtray from the arm to a small side-table.

‘Not a smoker myself, of course. My James likes his cigars.’ She paused for a moment, clawing back a fond memory. There was a sense that hope of his return was beginning to fade.

‘We’re really sorry there isn’t any more information to give on your husband’s case,’ Randle said, launching the conversation into business.

‘He’s just a case now, is he?’

‘My apologies. I didn’t mean to sound so callous...’

The woman let out a sudden burst of laughter. ‘Never you mind, no offence taken.’

Shaw interjected. ‘You haven’t heard anything more?’

‘Is that a question or a statement, detective?’ The woman’s expression dropped again, stern once more, steely eyed. The tension rose for a moment before her smile bounced back. ‘Look at you two boys. I’m pulling your leg. I know what you mean.’

Randle hid the sigh.

‘Are you sure there wasn’t anything strange about his behaviour that you can remember?’ Shaw couldn’t help but sound hopeful.

Mrs McGregor dipped a biscuit into her tea and bit half in one go, looking up at the ceiling as if she was thinking as hard as she possibly could. ‘Come to think of it.’

Randle and Shaw looked at each other.

‘There was something.’

A pause held slightly too long.

‘He disappeared.’ She put the other half of the biscuit in her mouth and crunched away at it. ‘That was strange.’

Randle couldn’t help but notice the odd circular motion the woman’s jaw made as she chewed. All he could picture was a cow chewing on grass.

Shaw broke the growing silence. 'There is one thing we're still puzzled about.'

'Yes, love?'

'Why did it take you so long to report his disappearance?'

'I had to make sure he were gone, first.'

The two men looked at each other and wondered if the inference was unintended. She noticed their look.

'I didn't want to be wasting anyone's time, did I?'

Randle leaned forward. 'It's just that without knowing his last movements, it makes it difficult for us to narrow down possible leads.'

The woman reached over and patted Randle on the hand, 'I know you'll do your best. And for the time being, I'll look after his veggies.'

'Sorry?'

'The allotment. I've had to take it on myself, on accounts of his being away. Like them women did in the war.'

Randle's mind stirred memories of time spent on his grandfather's allotment, a couple of hours a day after school as he waited for his mum to get home.

'Maybe I will pop down to see you there,' he said, not entirely from nostalgia.

The two detectives wrapped up the conversation and made their excuses to leave. They knew the old woman would have kept them there all day, given the chance.

'You gonna tell me then?' Shaw's curiosity shone through a mischievous wink as they walked back to their cars.

Randle ran a hand through his hair, scratching at the hardened waxy spikes as his mind flashed back to Loretta's gentle caress. 'Off-the-record.'

Shaw shrugged an understood agreement.

'Loretta Magdalene needed a word in my ear.'

'You shifty bugger. I never knew you had it in you. Or should I say, they had you in...'

He raised a hand to cut Shaw off. 'Look, one of their girls was a no-show last night.'

'Christ, Greg, it's not even twenty-four hours and you're chasing a missing hooker?' His eyebrows bounced. 'She must have been good.'

'She lives on Redwood. Last contact was yesterday evening, on the way to Loretta's. I said I'd do a sniff around, that's all.'

Shaw's laugh boomed out in one blast. 'I bet you did!'

'Redwood is a couple of minutes away. Let's go check her place out, see if there's anything obvious.'

'And if there is? How the hell do you plan on explaining your way onto that case?'

It was a good question.

'If there really could be a case, I'll tell Loretta to report it properly.'

Shaw let out a whistle as he opened his car door.

It wasn't even lunch and his day was already split between an old case with no leads, and a non-case with even fewer. And he couldn't see it getting any better.

Chapter 3

Shaw's sense of humour had gone by the time they reached the fourth floor of the flats on the Redwood estate. Tanya Bishop's apartment was halfway along the walkway. The door was dark green and had a cheap, brass-looking knocker above a mismatched letter box.

There was no reply to Randle's first knock, and Shaw did his best to catch a glimpse of anything through the single window to the left.

'Give it a sniff, Mart,' Randle said, holding the letterbox open.

'Piss off.'

'Queen and country, and all that.'

'This is your off-the-record jolly.'

Randle submitted and had a look through the letter box. 'If anything, I'd say a faint eau de toilette.'

'No body on the turn?' Shaw applied as much cynicism as he could.

'Not from in there, no.'

Randle took out his keys and fingered them until he found the two pieces of thin metal. Despite Shaw's grunts of disapproval, it took Randle only a couple of minutes to get the door to click open.

'It's not on the chain.'

Shaw knew what that meant. Anyone living on the Redwood estate knew full well to keep the chain on the door. A locked door not on the chain meant the last person to close it was probably on their way out of the flat.

'Tanya? Are you in? Police.' Randle stopped and listened for any response.

Nothing.

'I'm a friend of Loretta.'

The living room door was on the left, opposite another door, which they assumed was the bedroom. The kitchen was ahead and to the right, and last door was the bathroom.

Shaw went right.

Randle went left, into the living room.

He scanned the room. A TV sat in the left-far corner, diagonal from the door. A sofa backed up to the wall opposite, and a single, cheap Scandinavian-style chair sat in the right-hand corner. There was an old heater sitting in strange mock fireplace. A small shelf held a variety of ornaments and teddies with love hearts.

A cheap but inoffensive, white-framed clock sat just below a large canvas picture on the wall above the fireplace.

Randle recognised the girl in the picture as Tanya. She was a stunningly beautiful woman whose features gave away a heritage further than the UK. Her mother or father, perhaps? Wider family? The only other photos were of Tanya with what appeared to be a friend.

Shaw came into the room behind him.

'Nothing of note in there, Greg.'

'Anything strike you as odd here?'

Shaw looked around. 'No family photos. But I know a lot of people who don't have family ties.'

Randle turned his attention to the glass coffee table. A bottle of wine and two glasses.

'Is this girl exactly missing?' Shaw asked. 'Could she walk right back in here at any time and find us rummaging around.' He paused. 'Illegally.'

'Keep your hair on, love. We'll be out of here soon enough. Check out the kitchen.'

Shaw turned and headed into the kitchen, subconsciously raising his hand to feel the increasing bald patch at the back of his head.

The Redwood flats were designed to house as many people per square foot as possible, and the small box of a kitchen fit that remit. His eye was caught by a cork noticeboard on the wall adorned with the usual takeaway menus and overdue bill reminders.

And one business card.

Shaw took a blue latex glove from his pocket and held out the business card to Randle as he appeared in the kitchen.

‘Small world,’ Randle mused, as he noted the name on the card.

‘How many James McGregor’s do you reckon there are living within the same two-mile radius?’

‘James McGregor, estate agent.’ Randle pursed his lips and made an odd smacking sound. A little thing of his when his mind was trying to fish for inspiration. ‘Take a shot of that card on your phone and put it back exactly where you found it. Let’s get out of here.’

‘It’s just getting interesting,’ Shaw mocked.

‘CPS aren’t so keen on evidence collected whilst breaking and entering.’

The two men made their way out of the small flat and down the four flights of steps without so much as a word between them. Randle got in the passenger side of Shaw’s car.

‘As coincidences go, that’s a whoppa,’ Shaw sighed, scratching at his head.

‘Working at Loretta’s doesn’t stop her having her own clients.’

‘Why risk it, though? Loretta’s much safer.’

‘True. Unless she only saw a select few here. McGregor must be pretty close to retirement?’

Another grin lit up Shaw’s face. ‘Maybe she does pencil-sharpening services in her own place. Freelance.’

A silence hung between the men for a moment. Neither one new quite how to handle their next move. So far that day, they’d visited sex workers on the clock, and been breaking and entering the flat of a potential missing person.

Randle broke the silence.

‘Any chance it’s a total coincidence and he just happened to be the estate agent that found her the flat?’

‘On Redwood? They’re all council, aren’t they?’

Randle rubbed at his stubbly chin before turning the rear-view mirror to check and adjust his hair. ‘We need to double-check that with Mc-

Gregor's employer without giving away why we need to know. Then we need to have a dig back into his phone records.'

Shaw snatched back the mirror to readjust it and gave Randle a look that told him which of the two tasks they would each do. Getting phone records for Tanya would be more problematic. Tanya's case needed to get on record. Either way, Shaw knew best to leave the hard stuff to Randle. After all, he was the one with his fingers in some interesting pies.

* * *

'Chuck. How's things?' Randle opened the call to Charlie Osbourne, a civilian employee in the IT department who often gave Randle a helping hand.

'To what do I owe the pleasure, Mr Randle?'

'Just calling to say, hi.'

The man laughed. 'Bull. What are you after?'

By the end of the call, all Randle had been able to get was a bit more analysis on Mr McGregor's phone records.

Shaw came over to his desk, pulling up a chair and leaning in close.

'So, Sherlock?' Randle asked.

'Dammit, McGregor's boss is good. I almost bought a new bloody house.'

'Above and beyond, my friend.'

Shaw merely grunted. 'Anyway, there's no way McGregor would have sold or leased a property on Redwood. Not their target market.'

'So, if it wasn't his line of business...'

'...it was her line of business that led to his card being there.'

Randle knew there was something missing about their connection but couldn't put his finger on it. 'We have McGregor's phone records up to his disappearance.' He brought the itemised log up on his screen and the two men looked closely at it. 'Tanya has only been at Loretta's for a few months. But we don't know how long she has been seeing McGregor.'

‘You think he might have been an old client, from before she joined the house?’

Randle took out his mobile and looked up Tanya’s number, which he’d saved from his meeting with Loretta. He didn’t want to dial it at any point until it was an active case.

The two detectives set about matching the number to a few calls on McGregor’s phone records. Tapping at the screen, Randle began listing the matches.

‘Here’s one from about four months ago, and here again three months ago,’ Randle highlighted the entries.

‘He was seeing her monthly,’ Shaw mused, nodding his head slightly.

Randle leaned in closer to the screen. He could see another text sent a week before McGregor disappeared. And something more surprising.

A call a few days before he went missing.

‘Why did he suddenly call her?’ Randle asked aloud. ‘Just before he went missing.’

‘When did your girl go missing?’

Randle was annoyed by the phrase. ‘She’s not my girl. And only yesterday evening.’

‘The call only lasted eleven seconds,’ Shaw noted.

‘But it was answered.’

‘Then he got a text from her. And then nothing more until we picked up the case.’

Shaw sat back. ‘Why hasn’t the number been flagged in the McGregor case?’

Randle called up the case notes, finding the reference quickly. ‘Looks like a routine call to her number. Tanya fobbed them off with some story about a couple of calls about looking into moving house.’

Shaw let out a mild grumble but reconsidered. The power of hindsight made a judgement a little unfair.

Randle leaned back in his seat and rubbed his face. 'Right, I need to get Loretta to call it in properly to give us an excuse to have her phone number. Then we can notice, purely by accident, the odd coincidence.'

Shaw's grin spread across his whole face again. He knew how difficult it would still be convincing the DCI that a visit to Loretta's was a necessary part of any investigation.

Chapter 4

Carly had never felt so nervous going to Tanya's. Every other time she'd either been with Tanya or known for sure she was in.

Walking Redwood on her own was not the wisest thing Carly could be doing. Especially with no guarantee of safety when she got to Tanya's front door. But she had to see if Tanya was at home before going to Loretta's.

Carly tapped at the door.

'Tan, it's me.' She held her breath. 'Tan, you in?' Still nothing.

She stepped back and leaned up against the railing, lighting a cigarette and inhaling deep. The cold air prickled at her exposed skin as she watched the smoke get carried by the breeze. She could see the bus stop they used and a flash of anger at the waste of her time was replaced with a heavy feeling in her gut.

'Where the hell are you, Tan?'

The door behind her clicked open, and she turned to see it ajar.

'Tan? Is that you, hun?'

No reply.

'Tan?' Carly took one more drag of the cigarette and threw it to the floor. Tanya wasn't a smoker, and not even Carly was allowed to smoke in the flat.

She reached towards the door and gave it a gentle push.

'Tan, this isn't funny. What's going on?'

Still no response.

Squinting to see anything in the shadows, it was the distinctive smell that first caught her attention. Smokey, but not cigarettes. More refined. Cigar smoke.

Had Tanya got some bloke in there? Was she okay? Was it a boyfriend, or a client of her own? Had she poached an old bloke from Loretta's, and taken him home?

'You in there, Tan?' She pushed the door open just enough to slide into the hallway.

She saw the shadow first.

A faint light barely highlighted older eyes fixed in a stare. The wrinkled texture of a worked hand gripped Carly's wrist and dragged her inside.

Before she could let out a scream, another hand locked around her mouth, and she heard the door getting kicked shut.

The grip tightened around her mouth and fear kept her frozen, back up against the wall. The old eyes glared.

A sudden movement flashed, followed by a powerful blow to the side of her head. Carly felt her body drop, and her vision blackened as a burning sensation filled her skull.

Chapter 5

Day 3

Randle waited until he'd been given a cursory agreement from his DCI that it was worth looking at both cases before calling Loretta. She was more than happy to play along, giving him all the contact information she had. She also gave him the information for Tanya's closest friend, Carly.

'I don't want you spooking out my girl's Greg,' Loretta had told him.

'Don't worry. I won't. I'll only use the number if totally necessary.'

He ended their call and updated DS Shaw, who had already started flicking through phone records.

'These are the final few texts and calls to Tanya's phone.'

'Anything sticking out?' Randle moved behind Shaw to look at the analysis on the screen.

Shaw pointed at the final entry. 'The last number was not her friend's. And it appears to be a new number to Tanya.'

Randle looked at Shaw, who saw the concern written all over his face. 'We need to call that number, but we can't do that until we officially have her phone records.'

Chuck had come good on his off-the-record help, but now that the case was officially being followed, Randle knew he couldn't sneak anything slightly south of legal.

Randle reached into his pocket and took out an untraceable burner phone, dialling the number that was the last to connect with Tanya's phone.

'It's just going to voicemail,' Randle sighed. 'Let's keep trying it, but my gut is telling me it's a burner.'

'What's the next move?' Shaw relaxed back into his chair, rubbing at his chin. 'Something stinks about the Tanya-McGregor connection.'

Randle nodded. 'And I want to sniff it out,' Randle said, as he swung his car keys around his finger. 'Let's go do a recce around Redwood. Judg-

ing by the timing of the texts, it looks like Tanya left her flat with every intention of getting to work. Somewhere between Redwood and Loretta's, those plans changed.'

'And you think McGregor could be a part of that reason?'

Randle paused a moment to straighten his thoughts. 'I think McGregor *is* the reason.'

* * *

The two uniformed officers weren't smiling by the time Randle and Shaw arrived at Tanya's address.

'Sorry about the wait, guys.' Randle nodded at them.

'Sir,' said the shorter of the two officers. He had the look of an angry pug dog. His partner was younger and tended to look around when anyone was talking to him, as if waiting for something more interesting to happen.

'You've done good work, guys.' Shaw couldn't resist the sarcasm. 'Any response from the flat?'

They shook their heads.

'None at all?' Randle confirmed, putting on blue latex gloves.

The pug looked surprised, but slightly excited by the idea of a bit of action. 'Do we have...'

'Grounds for entry?' Shaw cut in. 'Of course. He's very worried about the safety of the resident.'

Randle nodded. 'Very worried. Dutifully worried, in fact.'

'And if you look at the lock, it appears it has recently been tampered with. See? Scratch marks like that. I reckon it's been picked.'

Shaw reached across to point at the lock from inches away, as patronising as he could.

The pug looked at the lock and noted fresh scratches that stood out. 'Definitely. Someone had a pick at that,' he said.

Shaw smiled. 'Go on, then. Give it a shove.'

It took the officer a couple of attempts, but the cheap door lock gave way easy enough.

Randle went in first.

Two distinct smells hit him straight away. And neither had been there the previous evening. He looked back at Shaw and tapped his nose.

Shaw followed him in.

'Scuff marks on this wall are fresh.' Shaw got a torch from his pocket and put gloves on.

Randle made his way into the living room, leaving Shaw to check the bedroom again. Part of the search was staged for the officers, but Randle was following his nose.

The distinctive smell of cigar smoke was strong. Randle turned and went into the kitchen, where he met Shaw.

'Business card has gone.' Shaw let a frustrated sigh slip.

'Check the bathroom. I need to find the bin.' It only took him a few moments and he'd found what he was looking for by the time Shaw returned.

'Hell of a smell of bleach in there, Greg.'

'She likes to keep a clean bathroom. Nothing wrong with that.'

'Too strong. Not lemon toilet stuff, I mean hardcore cleaning and very little rinsing. All over.'

Randle knew what he meant. The strong bleach was the other smell that hit him when the door first opened.

'Find anything?' Shaw asked.

'Maybe.' Lifting the bin lid, Randle fished out a foil pie tray which had clearly been used as a makeshift ashtray. 'Definitely cigar ash.'

'Cigar?'

'Which means we have a serious problem.'

'Business card, cigar ash, signs of a struggle.'

'Problem is, we can't mention the bloody business card now, can we?'

'So, what next?'

'Get SOCO here.'

When they got down to the car park, Randle paused and looked around the area. 'Why don't we have CCTV up in an area like this?'

Shaw shrugged his shoulders. 'Doubt it would survive long. Probably stir up a whole load more work for us, but not necessarily any more success.'

'Tanya would have caught the bus just over the road.'

'If she got that far.'

They left the carpark and walked towards the bus stop on the main road.

'Here's a theory,' Shaw said, burying his hands in his pockets. 'Two prostitutes...'

'Sex workers.'

'Fine,' Shaw rolled his eyes. He knew Randle was correct but was mildly annoyed by his flow being broken. 'First, Tanya goes missing. Then possibly her mate. Both work for Loretta.'

'You think she's involved.' Randle didn't hold back his incredulity.

'I'll come back to that. But McGregor is still missing. No evidence at all anything untoward has happened to him, yet.'

Randle looked at Shaw, waiting for his point.

'At what point do we stop seeing him as missing, and start considering him a person of interest?'

Randle left the thought hanging. There was no answer, but having the question there was at least worth considering.

They crossed the road and walked up to the bus stop. Looking up and down the road first, Shaw made a closer inspection of the timetable.

'Bloody close to McGregor territory,' Randle said.

'I'd swear their allotment is somewhere along this road, too.' Shaw crouched down, getting a closer look at the ground. He took his torch out and circled it around. 'Check this out.'

Randle moved closer and touched a dark speck of dirt low down on the bus stop. He was surprised how easily it wiped off. But was most surprised by its dark crimson colour.

‘Is that blood?’

Shaw nodded. ‘I’d say so. Check this stain on the ground.’

Randle stood and looked around at the window of the bus stop. It was a simple one-piece stop. Plastic window moulded round a metal frame.

‘There’s a pretty consistent light spray, which could, at a stretch, be blood splatter.’

Shaw nodded. ‘Too much guess work for me. Let’s get SOCO down here, too. If it is blood, we’ll need the DNA profile.’

‘I don’t like where this is going.’

Shaw turned to look at the wooded area just behind the bus stop. There were drag-marks in the grass all the way up to a small opening in the undergrowth. He gave Randle a tap on the shoulder and they both followed the line, careful not to disturb it with their own prints. Shaw pushed back the foliage.

About twenty foot in, they found small area which looked freshly trodden down. A few dried, lighter-coloured leaves had escaped most of the rain. But not a substantial blood stain.

Randle straightened up and took out his phone. ‘We might need a cadaver dog, too.’

‘Bringing in the higher IQ?’ Shaw teased.

‘No need to feel inadequate, Martin.’

‘What’s the other side of the fence?’ Shaw asked, pointing a little deeper into the woods.

They made their way through until they could see through the wire fence. The other side seemed to be the border of the allotments which they suspected could be where Mr McGregor’s plot was.

‘Mart, go find out where the entrance is, will you? I’ll call this in.’

Shaw laughed as he took out his own phone. It took him just a few taps before he was holding up the street view from a map search.

‘There’s a short gravel driveway up to the gate, about fifty yards up the road.’ Shaw held up his phone and wiggled it. Randle was hardly a

technophobe, but Shaw had no intention of walking around unnecessarily.

Randle rolled his eyes. 'Let's go take a look.'

'Shouldn't we wait for back-up?'

'Good point. Better call the ARU guys. Someone might throw a carrot at us.'

It took them barely a minute or so to reach the gravel path. The entire allotment was close to half an acre, with at least ten individual lots. Randle had seen larger plots, but not often within cities.

After having spent all the time on allotments with his grandfather when he was young, he knew a thing or two about how they worked. He looked forward to retirement with nothing else to do but potter about on his own patch, enjoying a slower pace of life.

As they entered the allotment and walked up the gravel path to the first couple of lots, they turned back to their left to get their bearings. The wooded area behind the bus stop helped put the pieces of the strange jigsaw into place.

Two lots separated them from the fence itself, and the one closest to them was particularly well-managed. It benefitted from four raised beds built using old railway sleepers. An old woman was tending to one freshly cleared bed, and Randle knew the design was more to do with tired old backs than planting needs.

'Well, hello there, detectives.' A smile widened between two plum-shaped cheeks. Almost plum coloured, too.

'Hello, again, Mrs McGregor,' Randle squeezed through gritted teeth, which he hoped were shaped like a smile.

'Whatever brings you here, my dearies?'

'Just undertaking inquiries in the area. Popped in to speak some tenants.'

Shaw decided to help. 'We'd completely forgotten you had an allotment here.'

'Horse shit.' The woman blurted out, the smile vanishing in an instant.

'Sorry?' Randle stifled a childish snigger.

'The foul stench. I can see it on your faces. Pongs, don't it?'

The men looked at each other.

'My husband swore by it. Helps the veggies to grow.'

'Manure in the compost.' Shaw nodded. He wasn't quite sure who he was confirming it for.

'Shit, manure. Call it as you like, love. Still comes out their arse!' Her cackle was swift and short. She waddled over to the shed in the corner and vanished inside. After just a moment, she reappeared at the door with a flask in one hand and the plastic lid-cup in the other.

'It's a very nice plot you have here,' Randle continued.

'Can't be taking credit for it myself.'

'The raised beds are good. Did your husband make those?' Randle tried to sound interested.

'He did them yonks ago. I wanted to help him, but my back wasn't up to all the bending. Plus, they look nice.'

'We notice these allotments back up onto the woods over there,' Shaw interjected.

'I can see how you two got your detective badges.' She cackled again. Her expression changed, dropping to a less amused one. 'And what of it?'

Randle jumped back in, wanting to maintain the rapport. 'Have you ever seen or heard any strange activity in there?'

'In them woods?'

'Anything out of the ordinary?'

'Like, people shaggin?'

Her abruptness caught him off guard, feeling like an embarrassed schoolboy.

'Nothing like that, love. On occasion, some kids from that Redwood estate come messing around.'

'Anything over the past couple of days or so?' Shaw added.

She shook her head.

Shaw started to walk slowly around the various sections of the allotment, impressed at how tidy the plot was kept. He moved closer to the shed and nudged the door open with his toe. It was only a cursory glance, but it looked somewhat more homely than he had expected. A chair in the corner and an old carpet covered the floor. The smell mixed between damp soil and fresh hot tea.

And cigars.

That's when he noticed the view through the fence twenty yards away, right up to the bus stop. He gave Randle an upward nod to signal it was time to wrap it up.

Randle reciprocated. 'Well, Mrs McGregor, it was a pleasure to see you again.'

'One last question, if you don't mind, Mrs McGregor,' Shaw said as he passed Randle on the way to leave.

'Columbo are you, now?'

Shaw smiled. 'Just a small detail. Do you know the brand of cigar your husband smokes?'

A slightly solemn look washed her eyes for a moment. 'Henry Winters? Something like that. I don't know. All the packs are the same now.'

Shaw knew which brand she meant. Close enough.

The two detectives left the allotments with a new energy for two cases converging at a concerning rate.

Randle waited until they were out of the allotments before he spoke up.

'What was the sudden exit all about?'

'We're getting nothing useful out of her. I want to come back later and talk to one of the other tenants.'

'Fair enough.' Randle was nonplussed by the idea, but still curious by the urgency.

'And I noticed they have a clear view of the bus stop from their plot.'

‘Bugger me. That means he could have been keeping tabs on Tanya for a while.’

‘Nasty perve has a comfy seat in his shed. Nice place to sit with a tea, cigar, and a vantage point.’

A call came through to Randle’s mobile and he stepped away when he saw Loretta’s name. He let Shaw begin walking ahead, back towards Redwood and their cars.

‘To what do I owe this honour?’

‘What’s going on with Tanya, Greg.’ Her voice lacked the usual husky, flirtatious tone.

‘I’m at work, Loz. I can’t really..’

‘Is she missing, or is she gone? Tell me that, at least.’

‘I can’t say yet. It’s a case. You know the score.’

‘Carly’s gone, too.’

The hairs on the back of his neck prickled. ‘Gone?’

‘Just like Tanya. Didn’t turn up for work.’

He was already trying to figure out how this couldn’t be connected. Two girls from the same place, and hundreds of other questions began to cloud his head.

‘When did you last hear from her?’

‘Yesterday. She was going to see if Tanya was home.’

‘Loz, I need you to call the station and ask for the officer in charge of Tanya’s case.’

‘Isn’t that you?’

‘At the moment. But it hasn’t been made public knowledge, and if a second girl is missing, that could change. Make sure you say you’re worried there might be a connection.’

They ended the call, Randle not even knowing why he bothered with such a flimsy statement. He picked up the pace to catch Shaw.

‘Carly’s gone missing, too.’

Shaw shook his head. ‘Carly?’

'Tanya's friend from Loretta's. Apparently, she went to see if Tanya was at her flat yesterday and hasn't been seen since.'

'Well, that's one hell of a coincidence.' His complexion greyed.

'Bear in mind the added stink of bleach and cigars.'

Shaw turned back to look at the allotments, frowning and tilting his head. 'She's never seemed too bothered by her husband being missing.'

'I think the marbles are getting loosely packed.'

'No, it's something more.' Shaw chewed at the inside of his cheek as he looked up and down the road.

'Let's hear it.' Randle could see a theory brewing.

'What if we are approaching this all wrong? Maybe Mrs McGregor isn't bothered by him being missing because he isn't. Not to her, at least.'

'You mean, she knows where he is?'

'More than that.' Shaw wagged his finger at Randle. 'She knows what he's up to.'

'Shit. That's a pretty big leap.' Randle let out a laugh at the absurdity of the idea. But his face dropped when he saw DS Shaw wasn't joining in with the joke.

Chapter 6

Day 4

'You beauty.' Randle slammed the phone down and pushed back into his chair, arms raised in triumph.

Shaw looked up at him. He rose an eyebrow and didn't hide the cynicism as he sat back in his chair for the announcement.

'That was the lab rat with the DNA results.'

'And?'

'Guess.'

Shaw let out a long sigh. 'Bus stop blood positive match to Tanya. And trace DNA for Carly found in the flat?'

Randle's face dropped. The surprise had been spoilt. He sat forward. 'But since we knew that Carly's DNA was likely to be in Tanya's flat anyway...'

'You had them focus on the scuff mark in the hall, and those blood traces match Carly.'

'Smart arse.'

'What's the next move, Sherlock Randle?'

Randle wheeled himself across to Shaw's desk. 'Let's stick with James McGregor as a person of interest, and keep the door open for the wife potentially an accessory.'

Shaw picked up a pen and chewed on the end.

'I think we might have enough means to get a warrant to search the McGregor house. For all we know, he's stowed away in the loft.'

Shaw frowned. 'He's been away for months. When uniform spoke to allotment tenants, no one had seen him there. And yet, despite her bad back, somehow the wife has maintained their plot rather well.'

'During the day. True. But you did say his shed was rather homely. And a great place for him to keep watch of the bus stop.'

Both men paused for thought.

It was Randle who stood first.

'Right, pincer-movement.' He said, scratching at the back of his head. 'You get back to the allotment, check it out for more recent signs and double-check with anyone there what they've seen.'

'Whereas you are...?'

'Going to call for a warrant on the way to the McGregor's and have a closer look.'

'How are you going to get her to let you in this time? We don't want to let her know we are onto them.'

'I'll make something up about a development in the case to do with phone calls, see how she reacts.'

Shaw stood and grabbed his tent-sized coat from the stand. 'I think we should get a live trace on our mystery phone number. You rattle her cage, then we can see if there is suddenly action on that number.'

With a plan laid out, they left the incident room with renewed energy. Their leads were thin on the ground, but after months of getting nowhere, even thin was an improvement.

Chapter 7

Shaw stepped out onto the gravel track to the allotment. A light drizzle was darkening the failing light, so he knew he had little time to talk to anyone before they packed up for the day.

A small, scruffy dog attempted to terrorise Shaw before running back to its owner.

'He won't bite. Unfortunately.' Greying, thin hair hung on to a scalp that looked only a few ripples away from snakeskin. His expression fixed into disapproval of life in general.

Shaw approached the man attacking the soil around ugly leaves of cabbage. Or lettuce. Something green and leafy. Shaw wasn't big on 'ground food,' as he called it. That was Randle's thing.

He took out his ID and flashed it briefly at the man.

'I wondered if you could spare a few moments, sir.'

'You wanna ask summat, just ask.'

'Do you know Mr McGregor?'

'I've said my piece on the matter to your lot weeks ago. It's writ' down. Maybe you should read it.' His lip curled at Shaw's unwanted disturbance.

'I thought I'd come down here and enjoy your company for myself.' Shaw decided to fight fire with fire. Frustration and sarcasm throttled up.

The older man straightened up and glared at Shaw. He stabbed his shovel into the ground two feet to his side and placed a foot on the blade. Leaning his elbow on the handle, he plucked a cigar from an inside pocket and spent a few focused seconds lighting it.

'What's your brand?' Shaw asked, hoping not to be given another coincidence to worry about.

The old man fixed his glare on Shaw as he reached into his coat, producing a small box. He threw it to the detective.

Shaw caught the box. And swallowed deeply. 'Popular brand.' He passed it back. He knew full well the man was playing for time, trying to work him out.

'How often did you see Mrs McGregor down here? You know, before her husband's disappearance?'

The old man snorted a laugh, which rolled into a deep smoker's cough. 'Disappearance?'

'And by that you mean...?'

He took a few small drags, puffing them out into the breeze. 'She were down here as much as him.'

Shaw let his expression convey his surprise. Play the old man at his own minimal word game.

'Shits on a shovel, them. Like peas in a pod.'

'When was the last time you saw Mr. McGregor?'

The man shrugged. 'Like I told your boys, I never paid the dirty old bastard no attention. He weren't no concern of mine.'

'Dirty? I take it you don't mean green-fingered?'

'Ogling young ladies all o' time. Never hid it.'

'You think Mrs McGregor knew?'

'A few rooms short of a manor, that one.'

Shaw felt his mobile vibrate in his pocket and gave the man a half-sincere apology as he answered it. He wandered up one of the walkways on the man's plot as he took the call, replying as little as he could.

'Switched on now? Can you trace it. Well, get an approximate area, let me know if it starts receiving a call. If you get a location on the phone, I want it. But text me. Don't call me.'

Ending the call about the trace on the mystery number, Shaw kept his composure with the old man.

'What do you use for fertiliser,' he feigned interest.

The old man looked at him as if he'd just broken a moral code of allotments. A look somewhere between incredulous and irritated formed a few extra wrinkles.

‘Soil’s fine here. I’ve never needed them damn beds.’ He gestured at the McGregor’s plot.

Shaw walked over to one of the four raised beds. Mrs McGregor had harvested vegetables, which were strewn in an untidy pile, and dragged the soil out over the sides. He knew nothing of managing a lot, but part of him thought it looked messy, and the vegetables he could see didn’t all appear fully grown.

He winced at the smell of the disturbed manure.

‘Stinks, doesn’t it?’ He had to raise his voice slightly.

‘That it does.’

‘Horse manure, apparently.’

‘Cheap shit stinks like no compost I used before.’

Shaw smiled to himself. ‘Maybe she ordered some kind of super-shit.’ The joke was not appreciated.

The old man rolled his eyes as he blew more cigar smoke out. ‘Good stuff should smell sweet like the soil.’

Shaw moved over to the shed, but the door was locked. Cupping a hand at the small, muddy window, he peered inside. A sleeping bag clumsily stuffed under a sideboard caught his eye. He couldn’t remember if it had been there the previous day.

‘Tell me, sir, do people ever sleep at the allotment?’

The man’s facial expression told him not to be so ridiculous.

‘You’ve not seen anyone hanging around their plot these past couple of months, then?’

‘Nope.’ The old man straightened up to rub his back.

Shaw smiled at him. ‘Maybe you should make yourself some raised beds. Mr McGregor apparently put them in so his wife could help, despite her back.’

The Old man laughed. ‘Now, tha’s real funny.’

Shaw shook his head. Back to minimal words. It was like trying to converse in haiku with the old man.

'She lugs all that dirt and manure. Ask me, it was the old man that was back-buggered. She practically wheeled that barrow over him.'

'She wear the trousers, then?'

'Well, she certainly didn't wear the skirt.' He pulled his spade out of the ground and held it in two hands. 'At least not the kind of skirt he liked.' The old man seemed to chew on nothing for a moment. Then he turned away.

* * *

Randle pulled up in the space next to the McGregor's red saloon, which was lined up with their front door, reversed in. Ideal, Randle thought, for loading or unloading.

Especially heavier items.

As he walked up towards the house, he glanced back at their car. The cogs in his mind were turning a little slower than he needed. The car wasn't caked in mud, but it did have a fine layer of dirt which spoke of several weeks without any kind of washing.

More notable, however, was a small area around the boot handle, which had been wiped clean. The same was true of the centre of the rear bumper, and most of the licence plate.

Slipping on a thin blue latex glove and glancing around to see if there was anyone watching, he took the handle and gave it a gentle tug.

Locked. Of course. But Randle's curiosity had got the better of him.

'Can I help you?' the voice cackled from behind.

Turning to see Mrs McGregor peering out of her door, Randle slipped the gloved hand into his pocket.

'I was just admiring how clean you kept your licence plates.'

She grunted. Then her expression lit up with a smile. 'I suppose I best get the kettle on.' She waddled back into her house.

Randle removed the glove and glanced at the boot. 'I think we need a little look inside you,' he mumbled to the car.

The slightest twitch of net curtain in the living room window caught his eye, and he paused. Could the old woman really move that quickly?

Randle noted how clean the path to the door appeared. Too clean for the time of year.

He knocked on the door as he pushed it open. He knew he'd been invited in, but the door was only just ajar.

The smell of cigar smoke was strong, and it was eerily quiet. The sound of the kettle boiling in the kitchen was barely audible, so he decided to follow the sound first. But he noticed smoke coming from the living room, rolling as if it had just been exhaled.

Cigar smoke.

He turned the corner into the room and his eyes fixed on the figure stood in front of him. A cigar was gripped between pursed lips. Dark eyes drew his focus.

The motion of the shovel was too fast, and the metal clashed with the side of his head with brutal force.

Randle saw a spray of blood hit the figure's face a moment before his vision blurred and he vanished into a weightless, pitch-black.

Chapter 8

'Answer your bloody phone.' Shaw slammed his hand into the steering wheel and threw his phone back onto the passenger seat. Randle's number had gone to voicemail again.

He'd just received another text about the mobile phone tracking. The mystery number was not only triangulating the local area, but a live call also located it close by. Over a housing estate.

It had been the wrong idea to let his colleague go to the McGregor's alone.

Shaw knew he was only a short drive to their house. He accelerated out of the rough gravel drive and swung the car round in a violent U-turn. He almost came head-to-head with oncoming traffic.

Fighting back the bubbling road rage, it wasn't until he pulled up at the McGregor's house that the penny dropped.

Randle's car sat next to an empty space.

Shaw tried the mystery mobile and Randle's phone again, but there was still no reply from either.

Leaving his car blocking Randle's, he ran up to the McGregor's door and hammered on it. There was no response. He backed up to give himself the momentum. With a sharp kick carrying all his weight, the door took one blow to swing open.

The musky odour of cigar smoke hit him straight away. He made his way to the living room where another smell dampened the air. A large blood patch covered the floor, and even more blood-spatter sprayed up on the ceiling, and every other surface he could see.

The detective's whole body heaved, and it was all he could do not to vomit on the spot. It wasn't the sight of blood that turned his stomach, it was who had most likely been the victim.

He knew that it could only have happened whilst he'd been at the allotments.

Shaw staggered back down the hall taking his phone out with a shaking hand.

'DS Martin Shaw. Back up. Now. Officer down.' He struggled to straighten his thoughts. 'Allotments on Fairbrook Road. What? Back-up. Ambulance, Fire, Armed Response, the fucking army. Everyone. Just get there.'

He ended the call gasping for air and noticed drag-marks up the path to the space where the McGregor's car had been. He couldn't believe how brazen anyone would have to be to drag something so publicly, especially given the effort it would have required.

Even for two people.

Rushing back to his car, he tried to blank out the images in his mind.

* * *

The red saloon had been reversed into the gravel driveway in a hurry, colliding with the wire fences either side.

Shaw blocked the car in to prevent any possible escape attempt.

Opening the car door, he could hear the metallic crunch of a shovel. He reached back to the glovebox for his retractable baton and checked his handcuffs were clipped to his belt.

There were no other tenants at their plots. The rain seemed to have cleared them all away for the day. Glancing through the fence to the McGregors' plot, he could just make out a single figure. It was crouched down, loading a roughly rolled plastic sheeting into the empty raised bed.

Checking his watch and listening for sirens, Shaw knew he should wait for back-up. But he wouldn't. Right or wrong, the case was now personal.

He stepped into the open.

'It's amazing what classes as manure these days, don't you think?'

The figure stood and reached for the shovel stabbed into the ground right at the foot of the bed.

‘Don’t even think about it,’ Shaw snapped.

The warning was ignored as the shovel was tugged out of the ground, wooden handle slapped into the second hand.

With a cigar gripped between the lips, the figure turned to Shaw with a sinister smile. ‘Whatever do you mean, love?’

Shaw was stunned for a moment. ‘Where is he?’

‘Where’s who?’

‘DS Randle was at your house.’

The woman’s smile dropped, and her eyes appeared to darken.

‘He were interferin’.

‘He’s a detective.’

‘Not anymore, he ain’t.’ Her eyes dropped to the raised bed for a moment. She waited for her gaze to meet Shaw’s again, then exhaled a large plume of smoke, which wrapped around her before dissipating into the breeze. ‘Now he’s just like shit.’

Shaw took a step closer. The woman responded with a slow shake of the head. She jabbed the shovel in his direction.

‘Where’s your husband? We know you’re in this together.’

The woman grunted as she waddled over the one of the raised beds.

‘Couldn’t have the bastard thinking he could get away with it with them whores.’

‘You buried him here?’

‘What else was I meant to do? Eat him?’

Shaw shook his head, exasperated by her callous logic. He looked at the four raised beds.

Mr McGregor, Tanya, her friend.

And Greg Randle.

‘My plants, me love,’ the woman switched back to unnerving warm tone. ‘They all need something to help them grow.’

‘Isn’t that what manure is for? The horse shit you told us you use.’

As he said the words, the answer suddenly dawned.

‘That’s what I said. Whore shit. You just never listened proper, did you? Too busy all worried over them whores.’ Her last words were dealt with venom. ‘Today, I get to use pig shit instead.’

Sirens squealed, brakes screeched, boots pounded the gravel.

The woman ignored the arriving officers and their calls for her to stand still. She continued to shovel more soil into the fourth raised bed.

The foul stench of decomposition finally became clear.

Shaw made his way out of the allotments and walked down the path towards the bus stop. A nearby streetlight flickered on and brought the area into a miserable glow against the twilight sky.

He glanced into the wooded area behind the stop, then over to the tower block a short distance away. He turned back to woman being handled like a kind old lady into the back of a nice warm, unmarked car.

The sheer weight of the past week, and what had happened to DS Greg Randle was beginning to set in. DS Shaw could feel the foul stench of death clinging to every part of his weakened body.

THE END

from the first DI Mike Stone novel

To Die For

Prologue

His heart pounded as he ran faster than his legs could keep up with, momentum and gravity doing most of the work. The beast that was trying to escape through his chest also clawed at the insides of his head. His mouth was sandpaper dry and his nose scorched by the cold air.

The darkness was broken only by slivers of light that were barely enough to make out the branches and trunks that snatched, scraped, and sliced his arms as he battled through. His footfall only just managed to keep within the limits of a thin track. No choice but to follow it.

But then it vanished.

He felt a sudden sensation of turning, twisting weightlessness, followed by a crushing blow to his side. His breath vanished in a single mighty gasp. Something in the darkness, a hidden trap, had brought him crashing down, but he had to get up and keep going. He had to keep running.

He'd stopped breathing for long enough to hear that the voices all around were still chasing. A beam of light cut through the darkness like a lightsabre, dancing for a moment, and then vanishing as fast as it had appeared.

Scrambling, falling from one foot to the next, over and over, stabbed by the rough surface, he continued his escape through the woods and down a slope. The adrenaline was rushing and pain had yet to set in, so he kept going.

The noise of his heavy, rasping breathing and the pounding drum of his heart were masking the chasing voices again.

He had to keep going.

The pitch-black fingers and arms of trees began to spread out and reach higher into the sky. Thicker bushes clawed away at the skin of his arms. Adjusting to the changes in light, his eyes began to make out more shapes: short, fat buildings like houses; a road, perhaps; fences and lamp-

posts. There was no time to stop, and barely enough time to turn and look for pursuers.

It took one final push to break through the edge of the woodland. The last bush scratched viciously at all the exposed skin on his arms and legs, etching lines of heat through his body, as if the woods were trying to drag him back.

Within an instant, the icy wind hit his face. The chase was still close behind, and although his instinct had been to run, his body now cried out to stop for just a few moments.

Scanning the open ground as quickly as possible, he could just about make out metal shards, wooden panels, and wire fencing. It looked like the kind of ground that in daylight promised great adventure, but at that moment gave him a chance to hide.

Battling through a small, low twist in the fence, he crawled across and found refuge behind a pair of rusted steel barrels. He followed a split-second thought to move a few pieces of wood, hiding himself from view, before the voices caught up.

And then he just sat.

Listened.

The voices seemed some distance away: they'd taken a different winding path through the trees. He managed to take a few deep breaths. Slow and forced. His muscles began to tighten...

...and the pain set in.

He tried not to cry out, knowing that he couldn't afford to be discovered. So, he bit down on the pain and clenched his fists.

That's when he felt the oozing wetness trapped between his fingers.

As he looked down in the faint, cold moonlight, he saw the dark crimson blood covering his ten-year-old hands.

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1. <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Die-Colin-Ward-ebook/dp/B074D189QJ/>

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from the second DI Mike Stone novel

Innocent Lies

Prologue

Ice cold wind rocked the girl sitting on the railing with one hand clutching the lamppost to keep steady.

Her other arm cradled the new-born.

Tears rolled down her face as misty rain drenched her from head to toe.

She stared down into the tiny, wrinkled face wrapped safely in the sling.

Flickers of blue danced from each edge of Galton Bridge. Radios crackled and worried voices muttered.

Everyone was keeping back.

Except one.

‘I know it seems scary now, but you won’t have to face this on your own.’

The girl didn’t look up from the baby cradled in her arm. Her tears cut through the rain on her cheeks.

The officer crept closer.

‘We just want you both safe.’

‘There is no safe,’ the girl replied, with a strong Albanian accent.

‘Whatever you need me to do, I will do it. For you, and that little one.’ The officer fought to keep her voice confident.

‘Please, leave me. Let us go.’ The girl’s sobbing grew stronger, rocking her more on the railing nearly one-hundred-and-fifty feet over the canal water.

Her grip on the post was unsteady.

The officer edged forward, speaking in softer, maternal tones. ‘You’ve wrapped the little one up safe and warm. So beautiful.’

‘You don’t understand.’

‘I want to.’

A radio crackled demands, and the girl shuddered.

The officer flung it behind her with a single whip of her arm. It clattered to the ground. A dark figure in the distance slammed a hand on a car roof.

Taking another cautious step, the officer lowered her voice.

‘It’s just me and you. I don’t know what’s happened, but I want to. Please, let me help you. Both of you. Beautiful baby, beautiful mummy.’

‘I am beast.’

‘Look at your beautiful baby.’

‘I cannot live this more.’

‘You can. Listen to your heart. You both have a whole life ahead of you, together.’

She looked into the officer’s eyes. ‘It too late. Everything is gone. Hope is gone.’

The officer moved another step, shifting to balance her weight as she took a deep breath to steady her voice. ‘Let’s talk? You and me. Your arm must be aching. We can hold baby. Keep her safe.’

The girl looked at the officer and something changed. Her whole body sagged, and a sigh deflated her entire being. Her long, dark hair framed a deathly white complexion in the moonlight. Her lips were almost blue from the icy wind.

She moved her shoulder, turning on the railing to point the tiny baby bundle towards the officer.

Taking the cue, and waving over to another to assist, the officer moved closer. ‘Let’s get baby into the warm.’ The officer reached towards the girl and had to make a split-second decision. She wanted to lurch and pull them both back to safety, but had to keep everything calm.

It was too wet for sudden movements.

There was no way she could take any risks with the baby in the girl’s arms.

A uniformed officer approached and waited for the infant to be passed. She was keeping a close watch of the girl, whose grip on the lamp-

post was getting looser with every second. There was a glance between the two officers which shared the plan with just a nod.

The baby was passed between them like a porcelain doll.

The girl reached up to her neck and gripped a crudely made leather necklace. A tiny half-heart shape glistened in the flickering lights.

She kissed it.

The officer turned back with a smile. She reached out a hand. It was a mother's hand, held out to a child in danger. A child in pain.

The girl looked deep into the officer's eyes and reached out, spoking softly through her tears.

She dropped the necklace into the officer's hand as she let go of the post with a gentle push.

And fell.

Extract from "Innocent Lies" by Colin Ward

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Other Books by Colin Ward

Novels

*To Die For*¹

Innocent Lies (Coming soon, in 2021)

Poetry

*Ripples*²

*Silhouette in the Sunset*³

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